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THE GOSPEL OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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THE GOSPEL OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

In all our schools of science, modifications both of theory and practice are gradually being introduced, so that by degrees the whole body of teaching is somewhat changed. Among teachers of religion also a new body of religious ideas is always slowly being formed. Even though the profession may be that of holding an unchangeable truth, a new emphasis and new combinations inevitably produce alterations. If in some measure we can gather up and state the results of modern thinking which have given old beliefs a new form, or a new dress, that should represent approximately the Gospel as it stands in the modern Christian mind. It is a somewhat ambitious undertaking; for the field of survey is wide and we can think only of dealing with a small section of it. We must not attempt more than to take up a few of the main points of the message which the Christianity of the present day is trying to shape and deliver, and these we must select with a view to having them as central and dominant as may be. The most vital Christian thinking concerns itself with three supreme realities. The key to its message must lie in what it has to express and advocate with regard to God, and Man, and Christ. Let us try to find a little of the best that the modern mind has to say on these greatest themes.

The outstanding feature of Christian theism at the present time, one may say, is its disposition to think of humanity rather exclusively in the terms of human-

ity. The "divinity of man" is a topic on which preachers and writers here and there like to discourse; but a still more common habit of thought is indicated by the expression which speaks of the "humanness of God." This tendency to think of the divine being as imaged or symbolized by what we know of human nature, no doubt arises as a strong reaction from the kind of thinking that widely prevailed during the period immediately before our own; for that made the outward world by far its greatest oracle of Deity. Almost the only God recognized for a time, where scientific interests predominated, was the so-called God of Nature. If one wanted to acquire reasonable views of the Maker and Ruler of the universe he was bidden to look to the physical structure of the world about him. There were the chief works of the divine mind, and from them one must draw what conclusions he could, concerning the character of the being responsible for their creation.

But of late years this assumption that the external world is God's greatest work has been sharply challenged. After all, is not the soul of man the supreme triumph of creative might and skill! What higher attribute has the solar system to boast than that of mere quantity or size? Wonder for wonder, is not man himself the crowning miracle of existence? If therefore Deity anywhere stands revealed in his works is it not humanity above all which should declare to us what he is! Moreover, for the purposes of such interpretation we have the advantage of some interior knowledge of ourselves, while we know nature only from the outside. The God of nature is much farther removed from us than is the God of the human heart. Divine

immanence thus becomes the characteristic doctrine of the day. The indwelling God is chiefly the object of modern belief and worship.

We have reason to say that this change in religious thinking promises immense gain, and evades many stumbling blocks that have caused trouble in the past; though it has its own difficulties to encounter that need to be guarded against with some care. When men turn entirely away from the God of nature to worship the God enthroned in the soul, and the thought of divine transcendence is altogether merged and lost in the thought of divine immanence, it is rather more necessary to answer the question why our human world does not go better, with this divine presence seated at the heart of it. And the readiest answer to that question which a certain portion of the modern mind has found is to suppose that God cannot be, as was once supposed, omnipotent. He must be limited in power, and like ourselves he is perhaps gradually learning how to accomplish more perfectly his creative tasks.

But where theism is led off along that track it soon finds itself quite without a road. One would like to post over the entrance to that turning, very conspicuously, the sign "No thoroughfare"! A Deity who is only a trifle wiser and stronger than men, and who by reason of the inadequacy of his resources is likely to fail them in a great emergency, is of no earthly use; or he is so little to be depended upon that religion has practically nothing to offer on that basis. Dogmas of infinity and omnipotence are of course incomprehensible. They have no meaning save that of ample sufficiency of wisdom, goodness and power. That meaning however is vital to Christian belief. The infinite is

that which we cannot see across, and which has no other shore that we can find. The thought of infinity is merely terrific and tormenting if we try to take hold of in any other way than this, and we have to acknowledge that no one can realize the infinity of any of the divine attributes. But on the other hand the notion of a limited deity is one of the most suicidal that theism could adopt. One would think it might occur to amateur theologians who write novels that, if it is worth while to have a deity, it is better to have one who can do something more than stand around and say how sorry he is that for the present the situation seems to be beyond control.

It is just at this point that theism may derive great help from its appeal to the God of nature. For, if our human world goes lamely and seems to be much out of joint, we have but to lift our eyes to the stellar spaces above us to find a perfection of movement and adjustment that appears to be absolutely without flaw. The God who established the laws of gravitation and light has not bungled his job. The adequacy of skill there displayed leaves nothing to be desired, and it is rather foolish to say that the wisdom which set the stars and planets in their places must have broken down when it came to the making of men. Meanwhile, we have only to accept the testimony of consciousness, which affirms our moral freedom, to explain well enough how it comes to pass that our human world functions so imperfectly.

The God of all power and might leaves us in large measure to work out our own salvation, because that is the only way in which we can climb up to the level where he dwells. We need not doubt the sufficiency of

his wisdom and power, when he thinks it proper to exert them on our behalf, and we cannot say exactly where the limits of our freedom and responsibility shall be drawn. For aught we know it is better that we should be left to learn through our mistakes till we have touched the very last notch of safety; though doubtless, however God may hold off his hand from interference with our ways, he will not suffer us to wreck entirely his creative purpose.

But while modern thought has run, here and there, into dangerous shallows, on the whole it has brought its favorite doctrine of divine immanence to some highly satisfactory results. This movement of reaction against the nature-worship of other days might be called a return to older and better traditions, but it is really something more than that. It has made a decided gain on what went before. The Deity of one substance with the spiritual nature of man, the human God, is now something other than any conception accepted in the past. Probably there is little, if anything, new under the sun, if we look deeply enough into exceptional individual minds. But from an ethical point of view at least the idea of God now seems to be taking a form distinctly better than any which has been common in Christian history. There is a new emphasis on certain aspects of the divine mind and character which promises a great advance of Christian faith.

For one thing, whether it be the growth of a more democratic spirit or the increase of a more enlightened moral sentiment that is to be held responsible for it, there is far less talk of the regal or kingly side of the mind of God, and of what the demands of justice may be supposed to require him to do. Perhaps the two

most dominant ideas in the latter day thought of God are those of benignity and service. He is not very much to us, what a certain labor leader once called him in crude but forcible speech, "an infinite boss". He is rather the Father and Friend and Servant of all. We do not think of him as being bound by the mere red tape of his own laws. He must be free at all times to punish or to forgive as may seem best in his sight. He does not sit upon the throne of his universe to receive the incense of praise; but everywhere he gives himself without stint or limit to create, and help, and save. No corner of his domain is so humble but he is there, as if there were no other place; and every thrill, whether of joy or sorrow, must be his pleasure or suffering as well.

This is not to shut out of sight the sterner side of a divine government of the world, but to balance the system and machine of governmental control with those human qualities that the idea of management suggests. God will be infinitely patient with our slow progress in the stupendous lessons he has given us to learn; yet he has sharp chastisements for those who will not learn. No mother's hand was ever more comforting or more caressing than his touch upon the repentant heart; no torturer's arm could be more unyielding where punishment is needed to enforce a lesson that would not otherwise be learned.

One cannot think that there is any doubt about the superior moralization of the modern thought of God, or any measure by which to compute the uplift that this should bring to the whole human mind. The irrationality of many Christian beliefs is not perhaps, in itself, a very serious matter. The world is so little

run by logic that a considerable amount of unreason can be borne without much difficulty or danger. But the bad and hideous thing is the shocking misrepresentation of the moral character of God which some of these beliefs have made. That is something not to be borne if any help can be found. Because, while it is true in some measure that man always makes his God in his own image, it is equally true that man is always making or remaking himself in the likeness of whatever he worships. The bad man never stands much chance of reformation so long as he bows down to a bad Deity.

Christianity of course has brought immense help to the world with its belief in a gentle and humane Man-god. But the good which this belief ought to have wrought has been much hindered and spoiled by the barbaric notions about the Father Almighty that have lingered on in the Christian mind. The God behind Christ, in whom for example certain revivalists appear to believe, if seen in human form would be a disgrace to any civilized community. It is impossible for the world to make much ethical progress till that dark shadow can be lifted from the religious consciousness. The newer thought of God which enthrones on high the best love and sacrifice and moral discernment we know, and makes not so much an eternal justice as an eternal goodness the supreme power of existence, is we may be sure one of great and permanent achievements of our time.

In the doctrine of man which is being shaped among the Christian preachers and thinkers of our day there is again a distinct appearance of return to older types of belief, notably to what was in the mind of St. Paul; though, once more, it is a movement of return quite

other than that of the Prodigal Son. This home-coming is one that brings with it its own gathered sheaves. It is quite possible, by the way, that we may all be knocking some day at the doors of the Mother-church of Christendom. But whether or not we go in will depend, one may suppose, on the way we are met at the threshold. If His Holiness should come forth expecting to find us clothed in rags and ready to say, "Father we have sinned," very likely we shall not care to partake of his fatted calf. At present we are rather under the impression that we have something to offer the head of the house not unworthy his acceptance. In this instance we are returning, though with a difference, to something like Paul's conception of the dual nature of man. We are coming to make something like his sharp distinction between the natural or animal man, and the ethical or spiritual man.

Man taken merely as an animal, we begin to perceive, deserves the meanest things that ever have been or ever can be said of him. In so far as he is ruled by his physical appetites and passions he mixes with them a fiendishness of disposition that makes him the worst and lowest thing by which the earth is infested. The four-footed beast is merely non-moral. But apparently the human being cannot be that; at least he cannot long stay in that position. He must rise above or sink below that level. Failing to realize the ethical purposes of his being he falls to depths of infamy that no other nature can reach.

It is a compliment to call men of this sort "swine"; there never was a pig so disgustingly dirty or so shamefully mean. Men in whom the animal part of them is dominant become devils, and nothing short of that. The

admixture of a higher intelligence with these lower traits makes them the worst kind of being conceivable. Never a word has been spoken in hatred or fear of their sin that goes beyond the mark. We speak of the "morals of the barnyard" that intrude themselves into the human province; but the morals of the barnyard are altogether lovely and of good report as compared with the perversions of which human nature is capable. To be sure man is, in part, to be rated as an animal, and his animal nature has its functions to perform. But we can only live with him on condition that this part of him is held in subordinate place, or is kept discreetly hidden from public view.

On the other hand, the spiritual man is great and wonderful and admirable beyond all telling. He is no mere refinement of the physical structure in which he dwells but he is, as Paul calls him, "a new creature." He lives by a different method and obeys a different law. Perhaps no more adequate expression of his true greatness was ever made than that which also comes from the pen of the same Apostle: "The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven." Or we may take Shakespeare's phrase, written surely of this higher kind of man, "In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a God!" For this spiritual being, striving upward through lower orders of existence till in humanity it comes to self-consciousness and command, must be an emanation from Deity. Man in spirit is a Son of God.

One of the clear marks of this divinity within him should be that he is an original source of power; he, too, can create. This is what our moral freedom means. In the act of choosing what road to take the human

will does a sovereign thing. What it creates may be infinitely small, but it is none the less real. It gives us the only hint we have of what the source of an infinite and eternal energy might be. In his small degree man can create, as God creates. He builds things that are the image of his own ideals. These ideals are not given in any past out of which he has sprung; they are not put upon him by any environment that surrounds him, or any sovereignty that is over him. They may be poor things, but they are his own; and some of them we must say, notwithstanding his little knowledge, are quite majestic. Among all the poor stuff that conceptual philosophy produces when it loses touch with the testimony of consciousness and the facts of real life, the metaphysics of determinism are of the worst. Like Ingersoll's theologian, they "assume what nobody knows anything about, and then say 'hence we infer.' " Happily we are now much delivered from thralldom to their baseless assertions, and their mere clock-work universe appears to be going quite out of date.

This spiritual man we begin to perceive is always a great builder, and what he builds is his own invention. Here also is a point of sharp contrast between him and the animal man. The latter rather likes to destroy. With him, wanton and needless demolition is a kind of pastime. The higher nature is rather dominated by a supreme passion for construction and even in its re-building finds it somewhat irksome to tear down what has to be cleared away. We may add that by the inmost law of his being the spiritual man is a social being. The animal man is social only so far as a common peril induces him to foregather with others of his kind.

But this other cannot live or grow in solitude. It is doubtful whether even the companionship of God can suffice him, being deprived of the society of his kind. Everything that he is distinctively is developed in him through human relationships. For him selfishness, indifference to others, is suicide. There is no heaven that he can find alone, and on earth he prospers only through a well-being of which all more or less partake. Here, then, is the one foundation on which social aspirations can hope to reach their end. Economic socialism is foolishness and a delusive snare unless it is based on the reality of the spiritual man. The co-operative commonwealth is a mere dream taken otherwise than as the blossoming and fruition of the spiritual nature.

Now the presence of these two kinds of humanity on the earth, and in every human breast, makes our human world always and everywhere a battle ground between them. By whatever methods they contend against each other, and whatever tactics they employ in their fight, the great question of existence continually is, "which is going to prevail." The doctrine of evolution tends to confirm this view of the case; for thus every successive type of higher life has been obliged to prove its fitness to live, through conflict. It is a great and unsolved question how far the spiritual man can take into his hands the weapons of the animal man without sinking himself to the lower level. Perhaps there is no theoretical answer to that question. To some extent the spirit may consecrate the weapons of the flesh to its use; though it cannot employ them without taking a certain risk of forfeiting its own position.

Anyhow the spiritual man has a constant fight on

hand to maintain his own place. There is no discharge and no truce in that war. No doubt it is better that he should not hate his adversary. But better, one may guess, that his vision should be partly clouded by that dark passion than that he should be blind to the tragic nature of the conflict he has to wage. Either it is his destruction, or he must put the animal man under his feet. We have our hope in God to help us; but the wreck-strewn past gives us small right to expect that he will deliver us, unless we do the utmost that is in us to deliver ourselves.

The one point in this connection on which we may feel somewhat uncertain of the drift of modern opinion is that which concerns the ultimate destiny of human life. It is a little difficult to make out whether belief in immortality is strengthening or weakening at the present time. Surely it should be plain to most people, however, that without the affirmation of continued existence hereafter any Gospel will be left practically ineffective; and one may predict that the Christian consciousness will ultimately find new assurance on that subject. Certainly interest in the question has been much deepened and quickened of late, and one may hope that new study of the grounds for belief in a future life will yield new confidence in its reality. With this proviso we may hold that a very reasonable and a very noble doctrine of man is being shaped in the Christian mind.

With regard to the person and mission of Christ, the great triumph of the Christianity of our day is the recovery of the historic Jesus of Nazareth. There is still much divergence of opinion in appraising the worth of that recovery, though all will agree that it must have

an important bearing on the future of Christian thought. Into the merits of the discussion between those who think that this historic Christ does not amount to so very much, when compared with the ideal conceptions that have ruled the mind of the church, and those who think on the other hand that the great opportunity of Christianity now is to get itself established, once more, on a firm historic basis, we will not here try to enter. Leaving these controverted matters entirely one side, may we not say that we have the key to the further development of Christian belief in the undisputed fact that we have, in the historic Christ, a most remarkable portrait of something like the complete spiritual man in action, as a living and breathing reality! Here, in a picture of real life, we may see what the spiritual man is and does; how he comports himself, and how his triumphs are won on the stage of actual affairs.

The church insists upon the absolute perfection of his being and his entire sinlessness. There seems to be little occasion to quarrel with or to uphold an assertion of that kind. In the nature of the case we have no means of knowing with regard to anything upon which we look whether or not it is absolutely perfect. Infinity can mean to us only sufficiency of perfection, and sinlessness can signify little more than what Pilate said: "I find no fault in him." In this latter statement the world is so nearly agreed that there is practically no controversy about it. Sometimes a criticism is heard, such as that his denunciation of the Pharisees was too severe, or that his purging of the Temple was an act of undue violence. But few pay much attention to such critics and objectors; and

it is seldom that a bitter antagonist of Christianity manifests any hostility toward the Founder of Christianity.

The world at large unquestionably sees in him a truthful representation of the spiritual nature of man quite the equal, and in the general opinion far more than the equal, of anything else contained in the annals and literature of our race. Whether or not the imagination is capable of making a better picture, it never has produced that result; and this image of the higher life, beside its moral beauty, has the advantage of being a picture of reality.

Just what then is that worth to the world? The answer to this question must depend largely on what we think of the worth of personality. We may surmise that the modern mind is by way of finding out, if it has not fully reached the discovery, that personality is on the whole the biggest fact with which it is called to deal. The hunt for a man to fit the place, always going on throughout society from bottom to top; the disastrous consequences that result from a misfit of this kind, and the triumphant success that follows when the right man is found, certainly inculcates some such lesson. The remarkable mental contortions to which people will subject themselves in trying to prop up or keep hold of a leader in whom they have once put their trust; or to break and wriggle out of connection with a personality which they have come to dislike, testify of the general feeling that, whether for good or ill, the man in question is an enormous factor of the situation.

It is often difficult to make out what the reasons for personal attraction and repulsion are, but of the great

part which such things play in deciding the course of events there can be no doubt. We may talk of the rightful supremacy of measures over men all we please; the fact remains that take the world as it stands men are the rallying points about which ordinary minds chiefly group themselves, and personal leadership is about the most decisive factor of the world's life. No satisfactory explanation of the victory of Christianity over other forms of faith in the Roman Empire can be given, save that its ideas centered (as the ideas of other cults did not) in the figure of a very great and wonderful man.

What gave Christianity its superiority then may be safely trusted as its main support to-day. At all events an instinctive assertion of some such truth is now so bred into the consciousness of Christendom that nobody is likely to have much influence over currents of Christian thought who makes light of the leadership of Christ. One may talk to non-Christians with much success, of course, though he quite ignores the personality which so much dominates the Christian mind. But this latter will not much listen to him. It is irrevocably fixed in its loyalty to Christ, and to its faith that the divinest reality anywhere provided for men to follow and obey is given through him.

The Fourth Gospel puts into the mouth of Christ a saying that as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of Man be lifted up; and that, being so elevated, he will draw all men unto him. This may sound like magic, but we have to acknowledge that it is magic which works beneficently, and on an enormous scale. The leadership of

Christ is not any mere high sounding phrase. Despite the alleged failures of Christianity he is immensely and incalculably potent at the present day. These failures have resulted, as anybody can see, not so much because he has led people astray as because his professed followers have insulated themselves against his personal influence by doctrines and philosophies that never had any place in his mind.

Anyhow, the Christian world is not going to give him up; and it is going to know him better in days to come than he has been known in previous periods of Christian history. In this fact alone there is an almost boundless hope. We need have no fears for a world in which the spirit that breathes through his precepts shall come to bear rule over a majority of minds.

The conclusions here stated may be briefly summarized. The greater moralization of the later thought of Deity; the clearer understanding of the essentially divine character of spiritual humanity, and of the line of cleavage that runs between that and the animal man; the increasing effectiveness of the leadership of Christ as our representative spiritual man through the ages;—these are here set forth as the distinctive marks of the Gospel of the Twentieth Century.

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